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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, December 31, 1936 ★

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

U. S. Department of Agriculture

Subject: "HOUSEPLANT PESTS." Information approved by the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, United States Department of Agriculture.

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W.R.B., our garden adviser, says that every time you buy a plant on the market or from the florist you run the risk of getting a new breed of insect or a fresh supply of some your plants already have. True enough, the florists fumigate their greenhouses and take every precaution to keep their plants free from insects, but in spite of all this, you're very likely to buy pests along with the plants; then, under the favorable conditions of your home, these insects thrive and soon produce large families.

Take the mealybug, for example. It looks like a little downy white tuft of cotton on the under side of the leaf and along the veins or hidden in the leaf axils or pockets where the leaves are attached to the stems. Sometimes mealybugs form large masses. They're always difficult to eradicate. A soap-and-water bath is one good remedy.

House plants need a bath occasionally anyway, and a good cold soapsuds bath followed by a rinsing with clear cold water, and then a careful removal of every remaining bug with a splint or a toothpick will go a long way toward keeping the plants free from mealybugs.

After you give the plant its bath and remove any remaining bugs, watch it carefully for several days to detect and remove any of the insects that may have escaped the general clean-up. About 30 days after the general clean-up go over the plants again, because the chances are that in spite of every precaution a few of the insects have remained on the plants to start a new brood.

Scale insects, those soft-bodied, round, oval, oyster-shell or tortoise-shell shaped insects that live under hard scales that they form over their bodies, are especially difficult to get rid of. The soap-and-water bath is probably best for them, the same as it is for the mealybugs, or a special solution for removing the scale insects is to first dissolve a cube of laundry soap about an inch in size in a gallon of water. You may have to heat the water a trifle in order to get the soap to dissolve, then let it cool and add a tea-spoonful of nicotine sulphate. Stir thoroughly, then wash the plant in this solution and rinse it with clean, cold water about an hour or so after it is washed. The idea is to let the nicotine soap solution stay on the plant long enough for it to penetrate underneath the shells of the scale insects and poison their soft bodies by contact. As a matter of fact, very few plants will be injured if the nicotine-soap solution is left on them.

Now do not make the mistake that one of my neighbors made when she thought that the fern spores on the under side of the fronds of her pet fern were scale insects. You can easily tell the difference because the spores on the under side of the fern fronds are arranged in a regular manner, and not hit or miss like the scale insects. These spores are the seeds of the fern and appear at certain periods and are perfectly natural. The presence of the scale insects, on ferns especially, is often indicated by a yellowing of the leaves. These scale insects are fairly easy to see without the aid of a magnifying glass, but they are very hard to get rid of.

Now here is another pest that bothers house plants that is a great deal harder to control than scale insects or mealybugs. It is called the red spider, and it is a little red or yellowish mite that is a very difficult mite to see without the aid of magnifying glass. When red spider once gets started on house plants, it increases until there are great masses of the mites, and they collect in tiny webs in the angles of the leaves, or where the leaf attaches to the stem of the plant.

A good bath in soapy water will go a long way toward removing these mites, or frequent syringing or spraying of the plants with clear cold water is effective in knocking them off and destroying them. The nicotine sulphate and soap solution recommended for the control of the scale insects is perhaps after all the best preparation for controlling the red spider on house plants. The main thing is to wash every portion of the plant, especially down in the places where the leaves attach to the stems, and in the folds or angles of the leaves.

In the greenhouses the florists control these insects by fumigating the plants, but that is out of the question for the average householder who has but a few plants in her living room.

Another method of controlling the red spider is to dust the plants with very fine or "dusting" sulphur, not the ordinary sulphur that you buy in the drugstore, but a special sulphur sold by the seed dealers and florists for dusting plants.

Plant lice or aphids are soft, green, brown, or black sucking insects which are usually found on the undersides of the leaves and cause the leaves to curl. This curling of the leaves forms a sort of protection for the insects. If you were to bring home a new plant for your window and it should have upon it three or four of these aphids, the chances are that within thirty days, not only the original plant, but nearly every plant you have in your sunny south window, will be almost covered with these insects.

Now the soapsuds bath with the nicotine sulphate added to it is very effective in controlling many forms of sucking insects. You cannot poison them by dusting them with the ordinary poison, because they do not eat the surface of the leaves, but bore into the leaves and the tender stems of your plants and suck the sap or juices of the plant. For that reason you have to kill them by the use of what is known as contact poisons, or by suffocating them. Now nicotine sulphate is a contact poison and it also gives off a gas which suffocates or smothers the insects. It can be applied either in the form of a liquid with soap, as I have already suggested, or as a dust.

This includes the most important of the insects that work on the leaves and stems of house plants, and they are the ones that we see and fight the most.
